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Six members of the U.S. House sent a letter last week to President Barack Obama and other leaders, expressing strong support for a little-known piece of legislation that would grant gay and lesbian couples the same residency benefits as heterosexual partners.

The measure — called the Uniting American Families Act — could affect 36,000 gay and lesbian binational couples, who would earn a path to citizenship not by getting entangled in matrimony, but by creating a new immigration category for "permanent partners."

For Chicago residents Karla Thomas, a native of Trinidad, and Stacy Beardsley, a U.S. citizen, the legislation is intensely personal.

The two women — who met four years ago— share a North Side Victorian cottage, two black Labs and some investment properties. Thomas' citizenship was never much of an issue until her job as an engineering project manager at an international cosmetics company was eliminated last summer.

The layoff threatened not only her paycheck but her employment-based green card, which means her time in the United States could be running out.

"No one should have to decide between the person she loves and the country she loves," Thomas said.

The Uniting American Families Act needs to be folded into any immigration overhaul that Congress is expected to tackle in the next few months, advocates say.

**"It saddens me to think that the struggle for immigration reform, a movement based on the fundamental principles of equality ... could push on without including (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) families," said Illinois Democrat Mike Quigley, who signed the letter along with Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., Barney Frank, D-Mass., Jared Polis, D-Colo., and Mike Honda, D-Calif.**

Opponents of the bill say any such provisions could be a deal breaker for immigration reform.

"It's like pouring gasoline on a roaring fire," said Kevin Appleby, director of migration policy and public affairs for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which sees such unions as violating church teachings. "Immigration is already controversial enough. Adding this issue could kill it altogether."

If Thomas, 30, and Beardsley, 39, were a heterosexual couple, their cozy domesticity could continue uninterrupted. They could marry, and Thomas could shop around her impressive resume — which includes an MBA from Northwestern University and a decade of experience.

"You work hard. You build a life together. You try to be good citizens," said Beardsley, who manages charter schools in some of Chicago's most impoverished neighborhoods. "But, really, the legal options available to us right now are very limited."

Under federal law, gay and lesbian Americans are barred from sponsoring their foreign partners, even if their union is recognized by a state where gay marriage is legal, such as Iowa and Vermont. Almost half of these binational couples have children, and their predicament has been exacerbated by the economic downturn, according to Immigration Equality, a New York-based advocacy organization.

For now, Thomas, who came to the U.S. to attend the University of Mississippi, has gotten a reprieve. Her employer has found short-term assignments in other cities to keep her on the payroll.

What happens when those projects run out is anyone's guess, the couple said. Returning to Trinidad, where Thomas hasn't lived for a decade, would shrink her salary by 90 percent. They could move to Canada or England, which offer residency to same-sex partners, even though that would mean starting over again.

The best-case scenario? Immigration reform that includes everyone, they say.

"It's disconcerting to see an issue that affects me ... also affects Stacy," Thomas said. "I have a lot of guilt about what I'm doing to our family."